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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 STOCKHOLM 000695

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SW](#) [IR](#) [BO](#) [GG](#) [RS](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: SWEDISH SOC DEM LEADER AHLIN ON BELARUS,  
AFGHANISTAN AND IRAN

Classified By: DCM ROBERT SILVERMAN FOR REASONS 1.4 (B AND D)

11. (C) Summary: On October 15, Urban Ahlin, the foreign policy spokesman of the opposition Social Democrats told DCM and POL counselor:

-- On Afghanistan, he is working to cement Social Democratic support for the Government's bill to expand troops, but it will be a "tough ride" for the bill.  
-- On Iran, Bildt is opposed to EU unilateral sanctions primarily because he wants to try to broker a deal resolving the Iranian nuclear problem. (Comment: Bildt and Ahlin are rivals, and the Swedish Government has other reasons for opposing unilateral sanctions.)  
-- On Belarus, he believes the government itself was surprised by the 100% win in parliamentary elections, which he attributes to election authorities acting independently in Homo Sovieticus mode. End Summary.

Belarus

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12. (C) Ahlin, who was in Belarus as an OSCE election monitor during the September 28 parliamentary elections, said the Belorussians themselves were surprised at how "badly" the elections went. To have none of the 110 seats go to opposition candidates looked "embarrassing." Ahlin said he asked repeatedly to be able to observe the vote count, even though he knew -- and his contacts in the Belarus MFA said they knew -- that the actual counting was irrelevant. "One could see from the organized lines of soldiers and students coming to the election center at set times that the votes had ready been decided" before the actual ballots were cast. In all, 40 percent of monitors were not allowed to watch the vote counting, he asserted. The MFA expressed "genuine surprise" that the Election Commission "had not received the message from the top" about allowing observers at the ballot counting, said Ahlin, who wondered aloud whether the problem lay with local election officials who grew up in Soviet times.

13. (C) Despite the election outcome, Ahlin stated it was good that the EU had lifted visa restrictions on a temporary basis, because Minsk has still not recognized the independence of the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, although he expected Belarus to do so soon, noting the recent Putin visit to Minsk. Ahlin commented that "Russia's strategic thinking is clear to me: an unambiguous message about their sphere of influence in the Near Abroad." Still, the Russians are "in shock" about the international reaction to the invasion of Georgia, "shocked that they are so alone."

Afghanistan

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14. (C) Ahlin said it will be a "tough ride" within the

opposition camp, and within his own Social Democratic party, to build support for the parliamentary bill extending the Swedish presence in ISAF in 2009. (Comment: MFA is currently putting finishing touches on the draft legislation, which is scheduled to be submitted to Parliament on October 23. Interlocutors tell us that a modest troop increase from the current 375 is possible, perhaps to the 410-450 range.) "Personally, I am a little bit nervous about passage of the bill," he stated, noting that within the party there was an active debate over when Swedes would know they had been successful in Afghanistan and how to define victory. Despite the debate, Ahlin pointed out that his party is on record as supportive of more troops for Afghanistan and for closing down Sweden's contributions to the Kosovo mission. Much will depend on the position of Lena Hjelm-Wallen, the head of the Swedish-Afghanistan Committee and a senior leader on the left wing of the Social Democratic Party; "she is the strongest friend and ally that we could have on the question of continuing our presence in Afghanistan," Ahlin said, adding that as long as Hjelm-Wallen is in favor, it will be "helpful" for those of us that want to stay there.

#### Tensions within the Opposition

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¶5. (C) Ahlin commented that the left-right debates within the Social Democratic Party "have really heated up" over the question the Lisbon Treaty, Afghanistan, Swedish labor law, and the participation of the Left Party in the opposition camp. "Of course now that we are in opposition, everything the government does is wrong," he stated. "If we were in government, we would clearly support an increase of troops in Afghanistan."

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#### Iran

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¶6. (C) We asked Ahlin why Sweden seems to be against EU sanctions on Iran, Ahlin stated that Foreign Minister Carl Bildt has become "seized" with the matter, seeking out briefings on Iran and meeting quietly with Iranian officials. "He thinks he can work a deal," Ahlin speculated, noting that serving as a mediator on Iran would enhance Bildt's stature in his campaign to replace Solana. Pressed further, Ahlin recalled Bildt's fascination in working with Iranians, for instance when he and Bildt both met FM Mottaki in Stockholm last year.

¶7. (C) Comment: Ahlin's speculation about Bildt's personal motivations for opposing unilateral sanctions on Iran is interesting, but not the last word. Bildt and his deputy Belfrage (see septel) frame their opposition in terms of skepticism on the effectiveness of unilateral sanctions outside the UN system. Ahlin and Bildt collaborate frequently behind the scenes, but are also rivals and critical of each other in public.

WOOD